

The Vocation of a Writer, Humanitas Luncheon

Some writers, when confronting that defiantly blank sheet of paper, have no object at all in mind, except to make money. I've been told that. I don't believe it. I've never yet met a writer who didn't have a powerful urge, a longing, an unconscious need, even an obsession to interact with an audience and share something of himself or herself. Writers are, however, fallible creatures. We devise characters to be little more than hobbyhorses for our own wit. We grind the ax of our pet cause with shrill grating sounds. We nurture scripts to juicy, round ripeness...but like hothouse grown tomatoes, sometimes forget the flavor.

Today we delight in honoring writers, and all their cohorts and collaborators, who have shared themselves in a most special way. These men and women, whose vocation is communication, have judged their efforts by the most stringent criteria...their own belief that television can find its voice and speak to the real possibilities of love and compassion and idealism and freedom and hope in our lives. They know that a writer can create the opportunity to reveal meaning in a puzzling world; to affirm the dignity of the human person; to foster freedom not only within the community, but the freedom to choose within each of us; and finally the writer has the opportunity to build unity among the diverse ethnic, cultural and sexual groupings which make the human family.

Why is this of such consequence to bring together all of you whose time is so pressured and so precious? Values need exercising, just as much as muscles. Prime time television can be an excellent vehicle for all of us to clarify our values and integrate our relationships to the complex world we live in. And that is certainly a vocation to be taken seriously, a vocation to be noted and rewarded, especially in these troubled times when the very concept of a vocation is suspect, and when the aspiration to put us in loving contact with our common humanity is cynically disdained more often than rewarded.

The Humanitas Prizes and this celebration were conceived to encourage writers and the entire team which together create superb television. After several years it is clear that some writers and producers and directors and story editors, ...as well as some production companies and network executives and sponsors..., share a special commitment to the humanizing potential of television, and have summoned the courage to risk their talents and their reputations to achieve that goal.

It is worth noting some of them and recognizing that a writer's drive to reach out and reach up, the compelling desire to share, could be evanescent dreams without the encouragement and help and tenacious devotion to quality of so many others. The goal of the Humanitas Prize is to identify those triumphant revelations of television's positive power, and to celebrate those who examine the human condition with eloquence, with humor, with emotion, with that special power to reach and more, a mass audience. It's necessary to remind ourselves that the illustrious honor roll of nominated shows does not reflect some ghetto of oddball and esoteric medicine, coated in sugar, but commercial hits. That's the real message of these shows. That examining the human condition, sharing a love of the human family, is something audiences want and embrace.

This is the third time that Norman Lear, Mort Lachman, Milt Josefsberg, Mel Tolkin, and Larry Rhine and the rest of the Tandem team have helped us to recognize that with all our bickering and all our stubborn

frailties, we are All in One Family...and I take particular pleasure in pointing out that the writers of this episode are new to television.

Burt Metcalfe and Larry Balmagia and Ken Levine and David Isaacs and the rest of that inspired gang at MASH are back for the fourth time giving us fresh insights into the compassion and the release of humor that keep us human even amidst the obscene madness and violence of war's maiming and death.

Taxi is a welcome newcomer, although it's worth noting the familiar names behind the John Charles Walters Production Company. And the equally familiar devotion to the human dimension in character comedy.

To have two finalists this year indicates a special kind of attention to artistry and values by the people who make Lou Grant. There are many graduates of MTM and other good series involved. Gene Reynolds from MASH, Seth Freeman and Leon Tokatyan, both former Humanitas finalists.

Hallmark's Stubby Pringle's Christmas continues a long history of caring, quality productions, this time with the Cates Brothers, also long associated with high aims. Hallmark gives the lie to those who claim that the commercial realities of sponsors allow no room for the kind of commitment we honor.

Movies of the Week have consistently explored the key ideas, conflicts, and potentials which we encounter in daily life. Our three nominated shows provide models of behavior, standards of success and failure, examples of right and wrong, images of masculinity and femininity. The three production companies involved, Learning Corporation of America, a beacon of quality in the education field; Joanna Lee's Christiana Productions, which consistently concerns itself with social comment; and Martin Starger's Marble Arch which is quickly establishing its reputation for quality combined with commercial success...all three prove that you don't need to be the biggest to be the best.

Finally, it's worth paying special attention to the fact that five of the nine finalists today are women. Surely there is no stronger argument for the increased role of minorities and women in television than what these women have already contributed.

Faye Kanin's Friendly Fire was the first TV drama to explore a family's relationship to the Vietnam War, and also provided a powerful insight into how people alienate themselves from others, even in time of their greatest need for comforting.

Joanna Lee's Like Normal People showed us that compassion and love is not the exclusive domain of "the beautiful people".

And Jane-Howard Hammerstein was able to deal with intolerance, love, understanding and human growth rooted in deeply moving, honest characters.

It's time to move on to the nominees and to the awards. I close with this reminder of the vocation that writers in particular can aspire to. And it's this. In time of stress, choices on how we are to live, and what we'll believe, must constantly be identified and examined. Television writers by reflecting the concerns of society and raising important questions, can be the catalysts to help people exercise their values and become participants in these most important human choices. Few professions offer such a challenging and rewarding opportunity. I congratulate all of you who have seized this opportunity and succeeded so honorably.